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ABSTRACT

Noting that many university speech students suffer from communication apprehension (CA) and must face the fear and anxiety of performance in front of the class, a study examined the effectiveness of group discussion, interpersonal communication, public speaking, and small group activities and interactions in reducing CA. Subjects, 57 students, enrolled in an introductory communication course in a community college located in the southwestern region of the United States, volunteered to participate by filling out questionnaires. Subjects participate in small group activities every class meeting except during speech presentations throughout the semester. Results indicated that students' communication apprehension decreased significantly over the course of the semester; and that utilization of a small group learning environment was a factor in the significant decrease in CA. (Contains 32 references. Two questionnaires are attached.) (RS)

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Running Head: Speech CA Applications

Methods for Dealing with Communication Apprehension in Higher Education Speech Instruction Via Use of Small Group Modalities

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Abstract

Many university speech students suffer from Communication Apprehension (CA) and must face the fear and anxiety of performance in front of the class. This paper briefly examines CA and discusses several options for remediation of adverse symptoms. An effective alternative is the use of small group cooperative learning, which is discussed extensively. This study indicates that utilization of a small group learning environment in an introductory college speech class will result in a significant decrease of CA. This study also postulated that small group activity would be a factor in decreasing student CA. Both hypotheses were proven.

Methods for Dealing with Communication Apprehension in Higher Education Speech Instruction Via Use of Small Group Modalities.

Communication Apprehension (CA) is a major problem confronting educators in the 1990s. McCroskey (1977) defines CA as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (p.78). CA has been heavily studied and documented during the last decade (Beatty & Andriate, 1985; Marshall, 1995; Motley, 1991). Much has been devoted to methods of helping individuals deal with CA and then alleviating the negative effects (McCroskey & Beatty, 1984).

The Effects of Communication Apprehension

Literature has demonstrated that many students suffer from CA. The grades of these students suffer because CA interferes with effective classroom interaction (Neer, 1987). At-risk students perform poorly in school because of the CA they experience (Chesebro, McCroskey, Atwater, Cawelti, Bahrenfuss, Gaudino, & Hodges, 1992). They avoid entering dyads and unfamiliar small groups due to the lack of confidence they experience while speaking to strangers and acquaintances. A meta-analysis of previous studies has demonstrated a negative link between CA and college grade point average (Richmond & McCroskey, 1992). Because expectations and evaluations of individuals are

based largely on their communication, high CA students are likely to be perceived negatively (Miller, Sawyer, & Behnke, 1992).

Basic Public Speaking Course

Due to the fact that students are asked to perform in front of the class, many college students enrolled in basic speech courses experience high CA. Poor performance in the areas of communication dealing with small groups, interpersonal relationships, and public speaking will obviously hinder any speech student (Rosnfeld, Grant, & McCroskey, 1994). CA students ask fewer questions and fail to fully participate in class discussions (Beatty & Behnke, 1991; Kelly, 1989). Students with a high level of CA are less likely to attend college (Monroe & Borzi, 1988) and more likely to drop out after their first year (Ericson & Gardner, 1992). Research also shows that students with high CA are prone to drop speech courses or to be absent when presentations are due (Richmond & McCroskey, 1992). CA is especially damaging for speech students because their grades are based upon their willingness and ability to speak to the class and interact in small groups (McCroskey, 1982).

Ellis (1995) notes that self-diagnosis and perception of communicative ability is the key to apprehension. Factors such as the student-teacher relationship contribute to this increase in confidence. The skills that basic speech courses

cover assist in the reduction of CA. Studies have demonstrated the fact that there is almost always an improvement in the student by the end of the semester (Ellis, 1995; Neer, 1987).

Teaching Strategies to Reduce CA

Instructors, their teaching strategies, the class, and the classroom all play a major role in the reduction of CA in students (Cohen, 1992; Neer, 1990; Proctor, Douglas, Garera-Izquierdo, & Wartman, 1994). Class size of twenty-five or fewer is more likely to create a comfortable atmosphere which will reduce stress and anxiety associated with CA (Bohlmeyer & Burke, 1987; Wood, 1988). Classrooms where seating is arranged in rows (as opposed to circles, random arrangements, or tables) are more likely to enhance CA (McCroskey & Richmond, 1993).

Cooperative Learning in Small Groups

Many studies have suggested that operations within groups is an effective solution to student CA (Barbour, 1990; Pigford, 1990). Cooperative learning is defined as an instructional technique that requires students to work together in small fixed groups on structured learning task (Cooper, Prescott, Cook, Smith, Muech, & Cuseo, 1990; R. Johnson & Johnson, 1985). In a cooperative learning group, students work together in a group small enough so that everyone con

participate on a task that has been clearly assigned. Students carry out this task without direct and immediate supervision of the professor (Behnke, Sawyer, & King, 1987).

Dunn, Giannitti, Murray, Rossi, Geisert, and Quinn (1988) found that after the cooperative learning small groups had dealt with their task project of learning the lessons, they had lower CA scores on the tests than their fellow classmates which worked individually. Their social interaction skills also improved in the small groups. The CA reduction of the students in the small groups exceeded that of other types of grouping such as large groups. Cooperative learning enables instructors to obtain feedback while circulating among the small groups, hearing students comments, and answering student questions (Eeds & Wells, 1991). Instructors using small group cooperative learning methods are not yoked to the front of the room in lecture fashion.

According to Nystrand, Gamoran, and Heck (1992), small group instruction should not be to assign the same tasks, but to design work that draws on the potential for cooperation and collaboration in the small group. Students can communicate in small groups by comparing ideas, developing a train of thought, airing differences, and arriving at a consensus on some issue. There is also a wide agreement among researchers that small group instruction can and

usually does have a positive effect on CA (Simons, Higgins, & Lowe, 1995; Slavin, 1990).

Slavin (1988) noted that small group instruction ventures beyond the positive effect on CA, for example, achievement, self-esteem, intergroup relations, and the ability to work with others (Slavin, 1990). According to Nystrand, Gamoran, and Heck (1992), college instruction involving peer groups is superior and more effective than conventional instruction.

Summary

There have been reference demonstrating that CA affects the grades of the speech student. Literature has shown that CA has a damning effect upon speech students because of the performance requirements. Several methods for the reduction of CA were presented and the formation of small groups have been discussed and shown to be a positive influence upon students with high CA. This area will be examined further to test the hypotheses.

Hypotheses

Based upon this literature review, we present the following hypotheses:

H1: The communication apprehension of college students enrolled in a basic speech class will significantly decrease throughout the course

of a semester in one or more of the following areas: group discussion, interpersonal communication, and public speaking.

H2: Small group activities and interactions in the college basic speech classroom will be one of the factors that decrease student communication apprehension throughout the course of a semester.

Methods

Subjects

Fifty-seven students enrolled in a introductory communication course in a community college located in the southwestern region of the United States volunteered to participate in this study by filling out questionnaires. No credit was given for their participation.

Participants were first asked demographics such as age, gender, and classification. Ages ranged from eighteen to forty-four with a mean of twenty. Twenty-nine of the respondents were male, and twenty-eight were female. Thirty-four students or approximately 59% of the sample were freshmen, twenty-one or approximately 37% were sophomores, one junior and one senior represented the remaining 4% of the sample. This course is a required course for all majors, therefore, students represented a diversity of major fields.

Procedures

In testing Hypothesis one, a questionnaire was administered to each subject at the beginning of the semester (See Appendix A). The measurement instrument titled Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) was developed by Richmond and McCroskey (1989). It measured CA in the areas of group discussion, group meetings, interpersonal communication, public speaking, and total CA. For the purpose of this study, we will examine the areas of group discussion, interpersonal communication, and public speaking. The PRCA- 24 is a five-point Likert-type scale, with response options ranging from (1) "strongly agree" to (5) "strongly disagree." Approaching the end of the semester, the PRCA-24 was administered to the same subjects again. A t-test for paired samples was used to analyze the results.

In testing Hypothesis two, the same subjects participated in small group activities every class meeting except during speech presentations throughout the semester. After finding a significant difference between the pretest scores and the posttest scores, the same students were then given another questionnaire in order to determine the reasons for the decrease in the scores (See Appendix B).

The author-generated measurement instrument contained demographics such as age, gender, and classification. It also contained the pretest and posttest scores in the following areas: group discussion, interpersonal communication,

public speaking, and total communication apprehension. In addition, it contained eighteen questions measuring the effect that the instructor, small group work, and classroom speeches had on the decrease in communication apprehension. The measurement instrument used was a five-point Likert-type scale, with response options ranging from (1) "strongly agree" to (5) "strongly disagree."

The results from this measurement instrument were tabulated using a multiple regression. Small group activities and interactions were operationally defined as any situation where three or more students work together on a structured learning task, with or without the instructor present.

Results

Hypothesis one predicted that the CA of college students enrolled in a basic speech course would decrease throughout the course of a semester in one or more of the following areas: group discussion, interpersonal communication, and public speaking. The hypothesis was supported in every area except in interpersonal communication.

According to the t-test conducted, there was a significant difference between the pretest and posttest in the area of group discussion ($t=2.54$, $df=56$, $p=.014$). Results from the t-test conducted in the area of interpersonal communication indicate there is no significant difference between the pretest and

posttest (t=1.5, df=56, p=.139). The t-test conducted in the area of public speaking identified a significant difference between the pretest and posttest (t=1.93, df=56, p=.05). According the t-test conducted on the total communication apprehension scores, there was a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores (9t=2.59, df=56, p=.012). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and the first research hypothesis was accepted.

Hypothesis two predicted that small group activities and interactions in the college basic speech classroom would be one of the factors that decrease student CA throughout the course of a semester. The three variables tested were: instructor, group activities, and speeches. The hypothesis was supported.

Based on the multiple regression analysis, there was a moderate and substantial relationship between the decrease in communication apprehension and the instructor, group activities, and speeches. The Multiple R was .43596. Because R Square was .19007, if students work in small groups, give speeches, and have an efficient and encouraging instructor, predictions can be made about how their communication apprehension will decrease approximately nineteen percent of the time.

In the area of public speaking, the experience of actually giving speeches was considered by the students to be the best predictor to decrease CA, the

instructor was the next best, and working in groups was the third best predictor. In the area of group communication, the best predictor to decrease CA was group activities, actually giving speeches was the next, and the instructor was listed third. In the area of interpersonal communication, the best predictor to decrease CA was group activities, giving speeches was the next, and the instructor was third. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and the research hypothesis was accepted.

Discussion

The literature reviewed demonstrated that a great deal of research has been devoted to methods of helping individuals cope with CA and alleviating the negative effects (McCroskey & Beatty, 1984). Although it is beyond the scope of this study to offer coping strategies, the data produced may be utilized to understand several remediation techniques. The study demonstrated that CA is present in many of the surveyed students and the effect can be remediated by the use of small groups.

Chesebro et al.(1992) along with Neer (1987) stated that CA interfered with effective classroom interaction and resulted in lower communication performance of the students (Richmond & McCroskey, 1992). The study provides instructors with alternative strategies to decrease high CA situations in

the classroom. It also proves that utilization of small groups can result in a moderate reduction of self-perceived CA as measured with Richmond and McCroskey's (1992) PRCA-24.

Because Rosnfeld, Grant, and McCroskey (1994) postulated that CA resulting in poor performance would hinder speech students, this study examined the self perceived CA of college speech students. A companion examination was administered at the end of the semester resulting in a significant decrease in total CA during the test period. The results of this portion of the study were then compared to a separate measurement instrument in an effort to establish reasons for the reduction in CA.

Cohen (1992) , Neer (1990) , and Proctor , Douglas, Garera-Izquierdo, and Wartman (1994) connected instructors and their teaching strategies to the reduction of CA in students. This study sought to identify specific teaching strategies and activities which could be utilized to accomplish this reduction. Results indicated that small group interaction, performance of public speeches, and instructor behaviors all play a significant role in CA reduction.

Dunn, Giannitti, Murray, Rossi, Geisert, and Quinn (1988) and Simons, Higgins, and Lowe (1995) addressed the use of small group learning and the positive effect it has upon the reduction of CA. This study compared the initial

level of self-perceived CA at the beginning of the semester. After participating in small learning groups, the subjects were tested again. A substantial relationship was noted between the decrease in CA and class activity within the small learning groups.

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Appendix A

Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA- 24)

DIRECTIONS: This instrument is composed of twenty-four statements concerning feelings about communicating with other people. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you:

1--strongly agree

2--agree

3--are undecided

4--disagree

5--strongly disagree

Just record your first impression.

_____1. I dislike participating in group discussions.

_____2. Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.

_____3. I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.

_____4. I like to get involved in group discussions.

_____5. Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.

_____6. I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions.

_____7. Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.

_____8. Usually I am calm and relaxed while participating in meetings.

_____9. I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.

_____10. I am afraid to express myself at meetings.

_____11. Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable.

_____12. I am very relaxed answering questions at a meeting.

_____13. While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.

_____14. I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.

_____15. Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.

_____16. Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.

_____17. While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.

_____18. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.

_____19. I have no fear of giving a speech.

_____20. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.

_____21. I feel relaxed while giving a speech.

_____22. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.

_____23. I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.

_____24. While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.

Appendix B

Questionnaire

Age:_____ Sex: M F Classification: Fr Soph Jr Sr

Group Discussion:

Pretest_____ Posttest_____

Interpersonal Communication:

Pretest_____ Posttest_____

Public Speaking:

Pretest_____ Posttest_____

Total:

Pretest_____ Posttest_____

DIRECTIONS: This instrument concerns your feelings about communicating with other people upon completing the basic public speaking course. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you:

1--strongly agree

2--agree

3--are undecided

4--disagree

5--strongly disagree

_____1. I like participating in group discussions because we work in small groups so much in class.

_____2. I feel comfortable while participating in group discussions because the teacher makes me feel comfortable.

_____3. Giving speeches in front of the class makes me feel less tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.

_____4. After working in groups in this class, I now like to get involved in group discussions.

_____5. Because the professor makes me feel at ease, I am not tense and nervous when engaging in a group discussion with new people.

_____6. I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions because of the speeches I have given in class.

_____7. While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I do not feel nervous because of the group activities we did in class.

_____8. I have no fear of speaking up in conversations because the professor makes me feel secure.

_____9. After delivering speeches in front of the class, I am not tense and nervous in conversations.

_____10. Working in small groups in this class has helped me be calm and relaxed in conversations.

_____11. While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed due to the way I am treated by my instructor.

_____12. I am no longer afraid to speak up in conversations because I gave speeches in front of the class.

_____13. I have no fear of giving a speech after working in small groups in class.

_____14. Because my teacher makes me feel at ease, certain parts of my body no longer feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.

_____15. After giving several speeches, I feel relaxed while giving a speech.

_____16. After participating in small groups in class, my thoughts no longer become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.

_____17. Because my instructor is encouraging, I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.

_____18. After performing speeches in front of the class, I feel less nervous and tend to remember the facts I used to forget during speeches.